

Present-Day Prophets: Al Gore and Van Jones

Rev. Mark Hayes
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Reading 1: from Al Gore's "Nobel Lecture" (delivered Dec. 10, 2007)

Seven years ago tomorrow, I read my own political obituary in a judgment that seemed to me harsh and mistaken – if not premature. But that unwelcome verdict also brought a precious if painful gift: an opportunity to search for fresh new ways to serve my purpose.

Unexpectedly, that quest has brought me here. Even though I fear my words cannot match this moment, I pray what I am feeling in my heart will be communicated clearly enough that those who hear me will say, "We must act."

The distinguished scientists with whom it is the greatest honor of my life to share this award have laid before us a choice between two different futures – a choice that to my ears echoes the words of an ancient prophet: "Life or death, blessings or curses. Therefore, choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live."

We, the human species, are confronting a planetary emergency – a threat to the survival of our civilization that is gathering ominous and destructive potential even as we gather here. But there is hopeful news as well: we have the ability to solve this crisis and avoid the worst – though not all – of its consequences, if we act boldly, decisively and quickly.

However, despite a growing number of honorable exceptions, too many of the world's leaders are still best described in the words Winston Churchill applied to those who ignored Adolf Hitler's threat: "They go on in strange paradox, decided only to be undecided, resolved to be irresolute, adamant for drift, solid for fluidity, all powerful to be impotent."

So today, we dumped another 70 million tons of global-warming pollution into the thin shell of atmosphere surrounding our planet, as if it were an open sewer. And tomorrow, we will dump a slightly larger amount, with the cumulative concentrations now trapping more and more heat from the sun.

As a result, the earth has a fever. And the fever is rising. The experts have told us it is not a passing affliction that will heal by itself. We asked for a second opinion. And a third. And a fourth. And the consistent conclusion, restated with increasing alarm, is that something basic is wrong.

We are what is wrong, and we must make it right.

Reading 2: from *The Green-Collar Economy* by Van Jones

Whom do we love and care about more? Our children – and their immediate need for a viable economy? Or our grandchildren – and their long-term need for a viable planet? Go ahead – choose one.

Fortunately, this dilemma is a false choice. It is true that we cannot drill and burn our way out of our present economic and energy problems. We can, however, invent and invest our way out. Choosing to do so on a massive scale would have the practical benefit of cutting energy prices enough – and generating enough work – to pull the U.S.

economy out of its present death spiral. But the true benefits would be much greater than that.

A serious shift in our energy strategy would open a new chapter in the story of human civilization. Right now, we are still scurrying about on our planet's surface, eking out our living as part of a vulture society – living off the dead. Out of the Earth we suck the liquefied remains of dead organisms. We burn our ancestors' remains in our engines, without ceremony. Then we go back to the Earth, like vampires, to suck out even more oil. Our coal-fired power plants munch daily on the black bones of the ancients – and belch out death. Today, the climate itself threatens to bring everything full circle: if we keep pulling death from the ground, we will reap death from the skies.

Sermon

After nearly two years of vigorous and sometimes brutal campaigning, the election is finally over. We have a new President-elect. We have a new Vice-President-elect. We have a new line-up of Senators and Congressmen. In January – two short months from now – a new administration and a new Congress will take over the reins of government.

Change is in the air. Expectations are high. There seems to be an opportunity for a new direction in America. One of the present-day prophets I'll be talking about this morning, Van Jones, told us Unitarian Universalists in his Ware Lecture at General Assembly last summer that we're "about to mess up and be successful." He pointed out that we've been really good at protesting and critiquing injustice, but that with the change about to break out in the form of a new era in American politics, we are faced with a new challenge. Can we govern?

That is the exact same challenge faced by the new Obama administration. The Obama campaign did a remarkable job of doing what it had to do to get elected. But now they must prepare themselves to govern. They must govern in the face of great obstacles: two wars, threatening economic collapse, and the specter of global warming, among others.

For our part, as I said last week, the elections were not the end of the political process, but rather the beginning. Our responsibility to speak out and make our voices heard continues. There is yet much work to do to make this the kind of nation we want for ourselves and our children. In the coming months and years, our prophetic witness will be needed to keep the pressure on to fulfill promises made, and to make that new era in American politics a reality. There is yet much work to do to ensure equal rights for all. Marriage equality took several blows in the current election, most notably in California, where rights previously granted have now been taken away. There is yet much work to do.

Today I continue my series of talks on the prophetic tradition, moving now to consideration of some present-day prophetic figures. I do so not so that they can be placed on a pedestal as idols to be worshiped, but rather to hold them up as role models – sources of hope and inspiration. The hope is that they can inspire us to do what we can do.

You've already heard, in our readings this morning, the voices of our two prophets, Al Gore and Van Jones. Now I'd like to share with you a little bit about them, and a little bit more about their prophetic messages.

It's not at all difficult to fit Al Gore within the framework of the prophetic tradition that we've been talking about in past weeks. There's that sense of a calling that has driven him to speak out forcefully. There's that issuing of warnings of coming calamity if we don't change our ways. There is the passing of judgment on both others and self. How did that passage end earlier? "We are what is wrong, and we must make it right." And in that statement, as with many prophets, is contained at least a glimmer of hope. There is the implication that we can still make it right if we so choose.

Al Gore, of course, did not start out as a prophet. He started out as a politician. He served as a congressman, a senator, and as vice-president of the United States. He very nearly became President. But throughout his political career, Gore had a keen interest in, and awareness of the importance of the impending environmental crisis as a political issue. In fact, that was a part of his motivation when, in 1987, he first decided to run for president. In the speech declaring his candidacy, he "focused on global warming, ozone depletion and the ailing global environment and declared that these issues. . . would be [a] principal focus of [his] campaign." [*Earth in the Balance*, p. 8]

In 1992, as Gore ended his time in the Senate, before assuming the vice-presidency, he published his first major book on the environmental crisis, *Earth In the Balance: Ecology and the Human Spirit*. In that book he argued that only a radical rethinking of our relationship with nature could bring us back from the brink of catastrophe.

Noted author and psychiatrist, M. Scott Peck said of the book: "[It] is a brilliantly written, prophetic, even holy book, clearly pointing the way we need to change to assure the survival of our grandchildren."

As with many prophets, however, Gore's message was not embraced universally. In some circles Gore was ridiculed as a mushy-headed tree-hugger. His single-minded devotion to environmental issues probably hurt his political career more than it helped. But for Gore, environmentalism was not a political tool to advance his ambitions. His devotion was genuine. I think it was more a case of politics being a tool to advance what he saw as one of *the* crucial issues of our times.

Once his presidential ambitions were dashed, Gore continued his crusade to keep the environmental crisis in the forefront of the collective consciousness of the world. When Gore wrote *Earth in the Balance*, he also developed a slide show on global warming, which he added to and improved over the ensuing years. After the 2000 election, he decided to take that slide show on the road again. For the last eight years he has traveled around the world sharing the information he had compiled with anyone who would listen.

It was a slow process, but Gore felt like he was changing minds. His persistence and perseverance – characteristics we've identified as common to many prophets – paid off in 2005 when the host of one of his showings suggested making a movie of his presentation. That led to "An Inconvenient Truth," an Academy Award, and the Nobel Peace Prize.

But the most important part of that story is not the awards and the personal acclaim. The most important thing is how that prophetic message broke through into the awareness of millions of Americans and people around the world. The message that "The truth about the climate crisis is an inconvenient one that means we are going to have to change the way we live our lives." Al Gore did not invent or discover global warming,

but he did – through commitment, dedication, and perseverance – sear its harsh reality into the consciousness of millions. For that, he deserves not only a Nobel Prize, but our deep gratitude.

Gore’s inconvenient truths are not yet universally embraced. Even some scientists still question some aspects of the message. But those pockets of resistance are shrinking, and there is a strong consensus that the dire warnings about the planetary emergency are on target. The challenge now, of course, is to plot a course that can avoid the potential catastrophe.

That brings me to Van Jones. I’m sure many of you have never heard of Van Jones. I hadn’t until last summer’s General Assembly, where he was the presenter of the annual Ware Lecture, which over the years has featured such major figures as Linus Pauling, Martin Luther King, Mary Oliver, and Kurt Vonnegut. I went to the lecture wondering “who is this guy?” and left it wondering “where has this guy been hiding?” Well, he isn’t hiding any more. He was recently featured by Time magazine as one of its “environmental heroes.” His recent book, *The Green-Collar Economy*, from which I read earlier, was published just a month ago, and is already a *New York Times* bestseller.

The subtitle of Jones’s book is “How One Solution Can Fix Our Two Biggest Problems,” and his website describes it as “not a dire warning but rather a substantive and viable plan for solving the biggest issues facing the country--the failing economy and our devastated environment.”

This points out, I believe, two ways in which Jones takes Al Gore’s message of warning to a whole new level. First is the focus on specific solutions. And second is making explicit the connections between economic and environmental problems, and emphasizing the importance of solutions that address both simultaneously.

I want to try and give you a bit of the flavor of Van Jones’s vision this morning. It’s a vision I find remarkable. But of course I can’t do it justice, and so I encourage you to look into it beyond this hour this morning. I have two specific recommendations for you. First, during our Lifespan Learning Hour today at 11:30, I’ll be showing a DVD of last summer’s Ware Lecture. This is a chance to hear Van Jones’s own words from his own mouth. I think you will be inspired, and so I encourage you to stay if you can. And second, I recommend the book *The Green-Collar Economy*, which describes the crises we face, presents an overall vision for addressing them, and includes both an extensive resource list and specific ideas for action at both national and local levels. I’ll be looking into making the book available in our library and our bookstore.

So let me touch on just a few aspects of Jones’s vision and message. The centerpiece of his proposed solution is development of a green-collar economy, an economy in which millions of green-collar jobs are created, especially for those who have traditionally gotten the short end of the socioeconomic stick. His definition of a green-collar job is “a family-supporting, career-track job that directly contributes to preserving or enhancing environmental quality.” The jobs themselves address the economic problem, and their “green” nature addresses the environmental problem.

One important quality of Jones’s analysis is his historical awareness. In discussing environmentalism he talks about its first wave – conservation – which began in the early 1900s, its second wave – regulation – which took hold in the late 1960s and the 1970s. Both of these waves continue today, but there is an important new wave

emerging. That is the wave of investment. One of Jones's mantras is that we can't drill and burn our way out of our problems, but we can invent and invest our way.

The excerpt I shared from Jones's book for our reading this morning ended by talking about reaping death from the skies if we keep pulling death from the ground. Well, in the very next paragraph, he writes:

There is a wiser and more civilized alternative. Rather than continuing to base our economy on a finite supply of dead things, we can base it on sources that are practically infinite and eternal: the sun, the moon, and the Earth's inner fire.

And so one piece of the green investment is to develop those alternative energy sources. We've heard a lot about that in the recent presidential campaign, but now it's time to move forward with this effort, which is not simply a huge expense, but rather a crucial investment in our future survival.

Another piece is investing in what Jones calls a "Green New Deal." He says

We will need to "green" whole cities. We will have to build thousands of wind farms, install tens of millions of solar panels, and retrofit millions of buildings. We will have to retire our car, truck, and bus fleets, which are based on combustion engines and oil, and replace them with plug-in hybrids and electric vehicles powered by a clean-energy grid.

And all of this must not occur in a moral and ethical vacuum. Jones suggests that the history of social justice work teaches us that "a successful movement for change requires three things. First, change must be grounded firmly in moral *principles*. Second, change must move rapidly to reinvent and realign *politics*. And third, change must effectively pursue and implement smart *policies*."

He goes on to expand on all three of those aspects. But I'd like to focus primarily on the first; that is the moral principles that are the foundation. In his analysis, Jones develops the concept of eco-equity, which is at the core of his vision for creating an inclusive, green economy. For him, the effort to achieve eco-equity rests on three important principles: equal protection, equal opportunity, and reverence for all creation. These principles mesh very nicely with our Unitarian Universalist principles of justice, equity, and compassion; and respect for the interdependent web all existence.

Like any prophet worth his salt, Van Jones appeals to the Old Testament. He contrasts two models of social activism, which he relates to two Old Testament stories. He talks about being a young activist and seeing himself as a David, standing up and confronting Goliath. That served him well, but he was eventually troubled by the shadow side of that model, and its requirement for a politics of confrontation and opposition.

He suggest that "With violent storms, rising seas, and financial chaos darkening the horizon," a better guiding narrative, or myth, might be the story of Noah and his wife.

Theirs is a story [Jones writes] of leaders who must make plans for a difficult future while trying to save as many people and fellow

species as possible. It's also a story about honoring and managing diversity, about making space for everyone. . . Instead of preparing to protest against a giant, as David did, perhaps it is better to prepare to lead a community through a crisis and into the future beyond that crisis, as Noah did.

And so Jones lays out what he calls the Noah principles to guide our politics. You can read more about them in his book, but simply put they are:

1. Fewer "issues," more solutions
2. Fewer "demands," more goals
3. Fewer "targets," more partners
4. Less "accusation," more confession
5. Less "cheap patriotism," more deep patriotism

If there were ever a good time to talk about new and better ways of doing politics, this is that moment. And these suggestions from Van Jones would make a very good start. This would be change we all could believe in.

May it be so.